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**STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE
US ARMY WAR COLLEGE
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania**

**ON SOVIET ASIAN POLICY:
A COMMENTARY**

by

Thomas W. Robinson

30 June 1980

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Composition of this memorandum was accomplished by Mrs. Pat Bonneau.

FOREWORD

This memorandum evolved from the Military Policy Symposium on "The Soviet Union in the Third World: Success and Failure," which was hosted by the Strategic Studies Institute in the Fall of 1979. During the Symposium, academic and government experts discussed a number of issues concerning this area which will have a continuing impact on US strategy. This memorandum considers one of these issues.

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DeWITT C. SMITH
Major General, USA
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

DR. THOMAS W. ROBINSON is Professor of International Relations at the National War College, National Defense University. He previously taught at the University of Washington, was Visiting Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and was a member of the Research Staff of the Rand Corporation Social Science Department. Additionally, he has taught at Dartmouth, Columbia, Princeton, and UCLA. Dr. Robinson received his bachelor's degree in physics and mathematics from Carleton College and the master's and doctorate in international relations and Soviet studies from Columbia University. He has published two books and numerous articles in the fields of Chinese and Soviet policies, Asian international relations, and international relations theory.

ON SOVIET ASIAN POLICY: A COMMENTARY

By way of introduction, it may be helpful to note four generalities that are commonly observed about Soviet Asian policy. First, Soviet policy has sought to accommodate to Asia's very size. Moscow cannot simultaneously play a role—much less a major one—in each Asian region and with regard to each issue, merely because Asia is so big. Distance and geography are stern barriers to the Soviets in Asian policy. Second, we must consider Soviet policy as it is applied to each of Asia's four subregions—Northeast Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia—and treat each region, for policy purposes, as an autonomous entity. Indeed, the history of Soviet Asian policy indicated Moscow has tended to develop separate regional policies according to its perceptions of regional requirements and its differential ability to apply instruments of policy at a distance. Third, it is necessary to treat certain aspects of Soviet Asian policy as derivative from its global policy. Thus, Soviet actions with regard to the other global actors involved in Asia—notably Japan, China, and the United States—reflect Soviet global strategy and relations more than Moscow's regional Asian

policy. Since the Soviet Union is a global power, it conducts its Asian policies with one eye to how they affect, and are affected by, its global objectives.

Fourth, and in contrast to the previous point, the argument has long been made that Asia as a political arena should be treated *sui generis*. This view maintains that every Asian region has special characteristics, separated for analytical purposes each from the other. Thus, Soviet Asian policy need not be viewed in the context of its—or America's or China's—"global" strategy. This view is elaborated on in Douglas Pike's paper, and is shared by many. It is also one which the Soviets have found, much to their dismay, to be increasingly true. This view is in some respects the contrary of the global strategy orientation, but it is possible to strike some sort of balance between them. Soviet Asian policy does indeed fall within the framework of its global strategy, but Moscow has also been forced to recognize distinctive characteristics of Asia that necessarily set its policy toward that region apart from its global orientation.

Any coherent view of Soviet Asian policy must integrate all four of these aspects. The papers under discussion for the most part address only certain aspects of Soviet Asian policy, mostly as concerns Southeast Asia, and tend to exclude reference to global Soviet strategy and the differential influence of characteristics of Moscow's overall Asian policy. If one remains only within their context, it is difficult to extrapolate to the general scene, to analyze Soviet Asian policy in light of their—and our—global interests and comparative approaches to international relations. Douglas Pike's paper, on the other hand, is an excellent microcosm of the whole.

FIVE SPECIFICS OF SOVIET ASIAN POLICY

We need to look further, then, to certain other aspects of Soviet Asian policy from which it may be possible to draw conclusions for Soviet foreign policy as a whole. The remainder of these comments examine five specifics of Soviet Asian policy in an effort to understand more fully the meaning of recent Soviet policy initiatives in Asia.

- We begin by noting that, in general, Asia has been a "tough nut to crack" for the Soviet Union, and is becoming more so. This is true for many reasons. Most important is the fact that all Asian states, with the exception of Burma and perhaps Bangladesh, are

for the first time strong as well as independent. Everywhere in Asia are found strong central governments, rapidly growing economies, and activist foreign policies. Moreover, many Asian states are overtly anti-Soviet, several are outright allies of the United States, and a "special relationship" is being forged between the United States and China, Moscow's principal global and regional opponents. So Moscow finds Asia a difficult place to make gains merely because of the growth of indigenous regional power.

- Added to this fact of strength and the configuration of power that follows from it, a further dimension is that the area is not a single region or a collection of subregions. There are, for example, actually two different East Asias, geopolitically and ideologically distinct from one another. On the one hand, there is "island East Asia," the off-shore or near off-shore nations (or city-states) of Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. To varying degrees, these states are non-Communist, pro-Western, rapidly industrializing, economically capitalist, base their modernization effort on the foreign-trade development model, and are democratic or democratizing. On the other hand, there is "continental East Asia," consisting of China, Vietnam and its Indo-China satraps, North Korea, and Mongolia. These countries are Communist, anti-Western, have socialist economies, are not foreign-trade oriented, and are essentially autarkic and nondemocratic. Here again, even among the anti-Western states of continental Asia, the Soviet Union has found itself kept out of the larger Asian picture. Neither island East Asia nor continental East Asia (with the exceptions of Vietnam and Mongolia) look to Moscow for leadership. Continental and island East Asian states are concerned either with their own internal order or, in the case of island Asia, with their relations with the broader Western world. Most every Asian state looks away from, or beyond, Moscow and would disregard the Soviet Union entirely were it not for the newly developed Russian ability to project raw military power into the area.

The Soviet Union is strikingly out of place in Asia, as both sets of nations grow in different directions from that toward which Moscow moves. It follows that, to best achieve their global foreign policy objectives, the Soviets would be well to seek success in some other region. Indeed, this is what we already see to some extent with Soviet activism in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Africa, regions where they may expect gains through use of force or

as a result of internal division.

Other, more basic aspects of the Soviet foreign and domestic environment tend to place Asia well down the list of Soviet policy priorities. On the domestic side, several well-known factors account for the predominance of Europe in Soviet policy concerns and help make Moscow disinclined to play a major role in Asia. The majority of the Soviet population is concentrated in European Russia and not in Siberia, along the border with China, or the Pacific. Thus, the immediacy of a threat from Western Europe as well as potential opportunities in that area compel more European, less Asian-centered policy priorities. Similarly, because the bulk of Soviet industry is located in European Russia, economic security interests are not focused in the Soviet East. The forbidding Siberian climate also plays a part in the subordination of Moscow's Asian interest to others, making the entire Trans-Urals area less attractive to the Soviet population and not conducive to active interest in direct relations with Asia.

Internationally, the Soviets must place greater importance on the threats and/or opportunities of Europe and the Middle East. To a large extent, they must concentrate their efforts in those areas, as well as against the United States strategically. These Soviet interests have dominated, and will continue to dominate, those in Asia. If Moscow is an "imperialist" power in Asia, she is so only "defensively."

- Indeed, it is tempting to argue that the Soviet Union is defensively drawn into Asia merely because of the need to compete with China there and not because of any real or perceived opportunities there. To the extent that they have involved themselves in Asia in recent years, the Soviets have done so in order to address directly the threat of perceived Chinese aggression, imperialism, and ideological competition. Much of Soviet Asian policy and activity toward states, Communist and non-Communist alike, and relating to such wide-area issues as development and foreign aid, is linked directly to the China factor.

- "Defensive imperialism" is only a part of Soviet Asian policy. Another is a combination of:

- global competition, particularly military, with the United States, exemplified in Asia by Soviet naval deployments in the North Pacific;

- the innate need to seek out opportunities in other nations, as in Indonesia in the early 1960's;

—geopolitical great-power pretensions, evident in the general build-up of Soviet naval presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as the military-economic movement into Indochina;

—the defense of socialism against attack by perceived Western imperialism, as in Soviet support of North Vietnam against America in the 1960's and 1970's; and,

—trade interests, most importantly with Japan as a means to obtain capital to assist in developing Siberia.

Moscow's Asian policy thus has defensive and offensive components, both of which serve to increase the degree of her interest there. The upshot ought to be that the Russians should be heavily involved everywhere in Asia. Yet they are not. In fact, as we noted above, most Asian states either resist Russian pressures, or allow the Soviets in only as a temporary makeweight for their own foreign policy purposes, or attempt to push them out. Moscow has no genuine, long-term friends in Asia. She has only temporary collaborators, satellites (Mongolia and Afghanistan), suspicious allies, or opponents, with the result that the Kremlin's success in Asia is minimal. This outcome is considerably different from Soviet experience in the Middle East and Africa.

A major reason for Soviet difficulties in Asia is to be found in the very nature of the instruments available to support Soviet foreign policy. Moscow finds the going hard in Asia merely because it lacks the usual panoply of policy instruments with which to influence Asian developments and thus to advance Soviet interests. A successful cultural diplomacy, an important means of policy, is virtually nonexistent in the Soviet case. Moreover, Soviet economic policy toward Asia is highly unsuccessful. With the exception of Vietnam, the Soviets have maintained an inordinately small economic assistance program in Asia, and have not succeeded in building strong and enduring trade ties with Asian states, except in the case of India. Most Asian states find Soviet goods unattractive, Soviet terms of assistance objectionable, Soviet technology second-rate. With the exception of certain primary products of interest to Japan, the Soviet Union has not been able to trade her surplus of natural resources in Siberia for Asian consumer goods—an exchange that ought to be beneficial to both sides.

In terms of diplomatic style, Moscow's motives have been patently transparent, its manner heavy-handed and manipulative, and its appeal generally unsuccessful. Soviet relations with ASEAN are a good example. The ideology which the Soviets seek to project

to Asian countries, i.e., simple anti-imperialism and Communist party-led economic development, no longer falls on such receptive ears in Asia as previously, or as compared with other regions. This is true for reasons of recent history—Soviet perfidy has come to be well known in Asia—and because of the general decline in the appeal of the Soviet domestic example.

Effective Soviet policy instruments have been reduced to the military/conspiratorial tool, the only one in which the USSR excels and to which it continues to devote most of its energies. Moscow has deployed an enormous air/land force against China; developed an air/sea threat to Japan; sent forth missile-carrying submarines into the Pacific against the United States; and recently based in Soviet Asian waters an aircraft carrier capable of attacking American and other states' bases in Asia. Soviet attack submarines threaten American access to such allies as South Korea. The Soviets have undertaken militarily to assist their only close Asian ally, Vietnam, in its own course of regional imperialism, despite the great distance involved. Finally, the Soviets have the ability to pose a sea and airborne military threat to all-important Japanese trade links to the Middle East through the Sea of Japan, the East and South China Seas, the Straits of Malacca, and the Indian Ocean.

Yet so long as China remains as firmly anti-Soviet as it has been in recent years, and now appears to be, and so long as the United States continues to maintain a reasonably strong diplomatic/military posture in Asia, the military instrument cannot be very effective for the Soviets. This is true for several reasons. First, the continued expenditures necessary to maintain the required effectiveness of the Soviet military, particularly with regard to China, poses a substantial domestic drain for the Soviets. Second, reliance on military force to achieve policy objectives, or to maintain the *status quo*, drives Asian states in the opposite direction. This has happened, for example, with Japan over the northern islands issue and the severe air threat to the Japanese islands. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, reduction of Soviet foreign policy to military threat tends to polarize Asian subregions, as in Southeast Asia. Ultimately it serves to coalesce the opposition more rapidly and more firmly, e.g., the United States and China, and South Asia after Afghanistan.

It should follow that the future for the Soviet Union in Asia looks rather bleak. The Soviets appear bereft of the necessary mix of policy instruments with which they might exercise superpower

prerogatives effectively. The only useable instrument they do possess is by itself and by its nature only marginally useful and in the end self-defeating. Indeed, as we have noted, the Kremlin has already redirected its main foreign (i.e., military) policy effort elsewhere. Afghanistan is the obvious but by no means solitary illustration of this trend.

- But clearly the situation in Asia is changing in ways that may yet permit the Soviets to attain much of their ends in the region. For one thing, the United States is neither as steadfast as the situation demands nor as purposeful as its Asian allies, including China, desire. Second, until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, it was evident that China had been more than toying with the idea of making major changes toward moderating its anti-Soviet policy. Afghanistan notwithstanding, it may well proceed along that path. As such, continued American reliance on Sino-Soviet enmity as the cornerstone of American-Chinese relations, and on the constancy of China's interest in good relations with its "enemy's enemy," represents a precarious course.

Third, Vietnamese military involvement in Cambodia and Laos—and perhaps elsewhere in Southeast Asia—will most likely continue for a long time, thereby guaranteeing a firm and perhaps increasing Soviet military presence in that region. Coupled with this are internal threats to stability of Indonesia and the Philippines that threaten to weaken the American presence in the region, thus giving Moscow renewed hopes for establishing itself further in the area. Fourth, it cannot be presumed that Sino-American relations will remain forever positive. Already the first beginnings of public differences over the future of Taiwan are apparent and voices are heard publicly in China criticizing the very fact of the American connection, to say nothing of its closeness.

Fifth, the Soviets for the first time can look forward to possessing an indigenous Asian base of power as a result of the slow strengthening of Soviet Siberia. This has the obvious positive implications for enhanced Sino-Soviet and Soviet-Japanese trade. Finally, we can see most clearly the rapid spread of the "island Asia" mode of modernization to Southeast Asia and even inland to China itself. This causes irrevocable changes in the Asian *status quo* and implies the limited adequacy of any continuously static policy, Soviet or American, toward the region.

CONCLUSION: FOUR CRITERIA OF SOVIET POLICY SUCCESS OR FAILURE

What do all of these changes and policy characterizations imply for Soviet "success" or "failure" in Asia? Obviously failure thus far has outweighed success for the Soviets. Indeed, the USSR's policy itself is largely responsible for the fact that the majority of the important Asian states (including China and Japan) have lined up against it, for the wariness of many of the rest (e.g., ASEAN) and for the crudely utilitarian nature of relations that states such as India, Vietnam, and North Korea have with Moscow. The upshot has been that the Soviets have been frozen out of the first group, pushed around by the second, and taken advantage of by the third.

This trend is likely to continue so long as the China and American factors described previously remain reasonably constant and thus diminish Soviet appeal and viability in the region. It will be augmented by the Kremlin's own shortcomings: a conspicuous lack of nonmilitary policy instruments; a deficient diplomatic style; and an over-reliance on threat of force, necessarily the most alienating policy. The Soviets have two hopes for their future in Asia: an increase in the number of "trouble spots," permitting Moscow to use the military instrument to greatest effect; and learning from their own and others' experience and mistakes.

What lessons can be drawn from Soviet Asian policy for determining general success or failure in foreign policy? Success or failure in the broader sense can be assessed only over a longer term than is considered here and only as measured against some agreed criteria. If, for example, we inspect the entire 60-odd years of Soviet Asian policy, the Soviets have had numerous policy failures in each short term.

Nevertheless, each "failure" contributed something to longer term overall "success," if we understand "success" according to four criteria: Soviet participation in and thus influence over the area; comparison of domestic costs to foreign policy benefits; the general trend of Asian history; and, the degree to which Asia has figured in Moscow's global competition with Washington and, more recently, Peking.

On these criteria, if one computes an approximate weighted average, Soviet policy in Asia over the last 50 years has been marginally successful, while over the last 20, it has been mostly a

failure. Over the longer term, Soviet influence in Asia has grown—although not greatly as compared with the 1920's; the domestic cost has not been overly high; the trend of Asian history has generally been favorable to Leninist communism—although not necessarily to Soviet leadership of Asian Communist parties; and Asia has at least not been a hinderance to Soviet competition elsewhere with the United States.

In the last 20 years, however, the story has been somewhat different. The Soviet Union today is probably no more influential in all of Asia than it was in 1960, and probably less; domestic costs in support of its Asian military outreach have risen perceptively; the general trend of history has turned against Moscow, when one considers strong local nationalism, the rise of "island Asia," and the loss of China and North Korea to Moscow; and Asia has turned out to be a net drain on Russian energies, drawing attention and resources away from the more important global competition with Washington and forcing Moscow to change the nature of its investment in Africa and the Middle East just to compete with Peking there.

What the future will hold is, naturally, difficult to say. But these same criteria, and the generalities and specifics of Soviet Asian policy, would seem to indicate that Asia will not be the place of great forward movement for the Soviet Union over the next decade or two.

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